

WISCONSIN DNR FISHERIES INFORMATION SHEET

Water: South Branch Oconto River

County: Oconto

WBIC: 480900

Year: 2017

The North and South Branches of the Oconto River join near Suring to form the Oconto River. The watershed is primarily forested with limited agricultural activity. The South Branch Oconto River (SBOR) has a total length of 54.6 miles and averages about 40 feet across in the lower reaches. The South Branch Oconto River Fishery Area, in the lower reaches of the stream, was created in 1961. Since that time, the Department of Natural Resources has acquired over 690 acres of land bordering the river. As a result, over 11 miles of the SBOR flows through the fishery area. The Fishery Area was established to enhance native trout populations while improving access for anglers.

Brook and brown trout were stocked in most but not all years from 1994 to 2007 in the SBOR. During most of those years, stocked fish originated from wild trout collected from the SBOR in the CTH T area of Oconto and Langlade counties. The wild trout program was a cooperative program carried out by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the Oconto River Chapter of Trout Unlimited, and the Suring Sportsmen's Club. The wild fish were initially stocked only in the Fishery Area. A weir project was conducted in May/June 2007 to assess the contribution of stocked (fin clipped) fish. Zero out of 140 brook trout had fin clips, and only 5% of brown trout captured were of hatchery origin. This data, along with surveys carried out at other locations along the SBOR, suggested that the stocking of feral trout into this river system should be discontinued as no significant increase in the population was observed from these efforts. Wisconsin DNR believes that natural reproduction of brook and brown trout in the upper sections of the river are adequate to maintain a healthy fishery within the entire SBOR.

On September 13, 2017 a 0.48 mile section of the SBOR was sampled using a barge electroshocker at the bridge crossing of CTH W, west of Mountain in the Town of Doty, Oconto County (T.31N.-R.15E. Section 26) (Figure 3). Previous trout surveys at that location (1999 - 2006) consisted of population estimates utilizing mark and recapture techniques over a two-day period. Recent surveys (2008 and later) comprised only one day of sampling at the same location. This section is considered a trend site, to be surveyed on a two-year rotation. The 2014 survey was moved to 2015. Stream shocking surveys have been conducted at other sites on the SBOR throughout the years but this informational sheet highlights results from the trend site at CTH W.

The overall health of the trout fisheries in the SBOR is very good. Successful reproduction and recruitment of both brook and brown trout were evident from the length frequency of fish collected (Figures 1 and 2). Fair numbers of legal sized brook and brown trout were also present. High water during the 2015 and 2017 surveys may have contributed to some fish avoiding the electrical field of the stream shocker. Also, trout may have been dispersed into other reaches of the SBOR system as a result of higher water during those surveys.

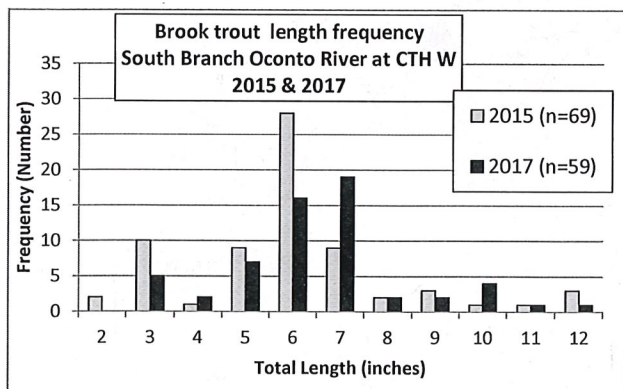


Figure 1. Brook trout length frequency for the South Branch Oconto River, Oconto County Wisconsin.

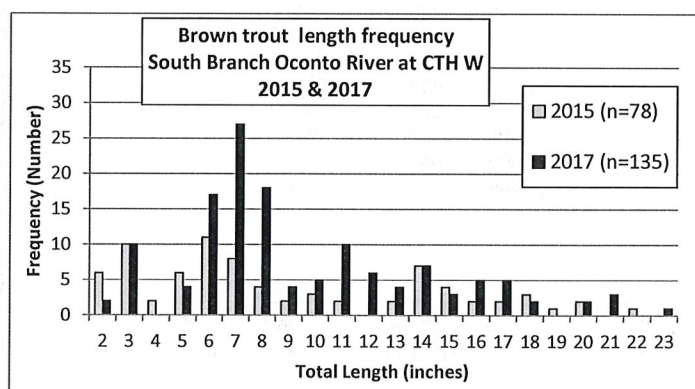


Figure 2. Brown trout length frequency for the South Branch Oconto River, Oconto County Wisconsin.

Brook Trout

A total of 59 brook trout were collected, ranging in length from 3.1 to 12.3 inches (Figure 1). The average length of brook trout was 6.9 inches compared to 6.5 inches in 2015. The number of brook trout was 123 per mile in 2017 compared to 143 per mile in 2015. Between 2004 and 2017, brook trout catch per effort ranged between 123-603 per mile (Table 1). The length frequency chart suggests that several year classes of brook trout are contributing to the population.

Brown Trout

A total of 135 brown trout were collected, ranging in length from 2.9 to 23.4 inches (Figure 2). The average length of brown trout was 9.9 inches compared to 9.3 inches in 2015 and 8.8 inches in 2012. The number of brown trout was 281 per mile in 2017 compared to 162 per mile in 2015. Between 2004 and 2017, brown trout catch per effort ranged between 162-439 per mile (Table 1). The length frequency chart suggests that several year classes of brown trout are contributing to the population.

There are many road crossing access points along the entire SBOR. Major road crossings occur on County Highways W, T and AA and State Highway 32. Parking areas with access to the Fishery Area are located at the end of Spruce Road, at Hill Road, and at STH 32.

Various habitat improvement projects were completed on the SBOR over the last several decades, mostly within the upper portions of the river. These projects include the addition of bank covers, brush bundles, boulders, and thalweg restoration. Most recently (2015-2017) a habitat project was done within the Fishery Area from the end of Spruce Road down to STH 32. That project involved cutting large overhanging trees, mostly old willows, and anchoring them along the streambank to provide better fish habitat and to improve navigability. At the Barrier Free access above CTH T, brush bundles were installed by WDNR and Trout Unlimited volunteers in 2016 and 2017.

The trout fishing season on the SBOR begins on the first Saturday in May at 5:00 A.M. and runs through October 15. Anglers may participate in the early catch and release season for trout on the SBOR downstream of CTH AA from the first Saturday in January to the Friday preceding the first Saturday in May.

As part of a statewide initiative to review and update trout regulations, new regulations went into effect in 2016. The current fishing regulations classify the SBOR upstream of the Menominee Reservation and below STH 32 as "Yellow", with 3 trout in total over 8 inches allowed.

The section of the SBOR between the Menominee Reservation and STH 32 has special regulations whereby only artificial lures may be used. A 12 inch minimum size limit for brook trout and brown trout applies. The daily bag limit is 2 trout in total. See Figure 3.

Anglers are encouraged to obtain and review a current copy of the trout fishing regulations before fishing these areas. Trout fishing regulations can be downloaded from the DNR's website at:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/fishing/regulations/index.html>

Additional information, including detailed access maps can be found at:

<http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/lands/fisheriesareas/2350southbrocontoriver.html>

Table 1. Catch per unit effort (number of fish per mile) captured in surveys from 2004 to 2017 at South Branch Oconto River at CTH W.

Year	Brook trout CPE	Brown trout CPE
2017	123	281
2015	143	162
2013	603	366
2012	435	439
2010	425	261
2008	264	275
2006	472	263
2005	459	369
2004	287	168

Questions regarding fisheries management activities for the South Branch Oconto River, Oconto County, can be directed to:

Tammie Paoli, fisheries biologist
Inland southern Oconto County
and Green Bay waters

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources
101 N. Ogden Road
Suite A
Peshtigo, WI 54157
(715) 582-5052
email: tammie.paoli@wisconsin.gov

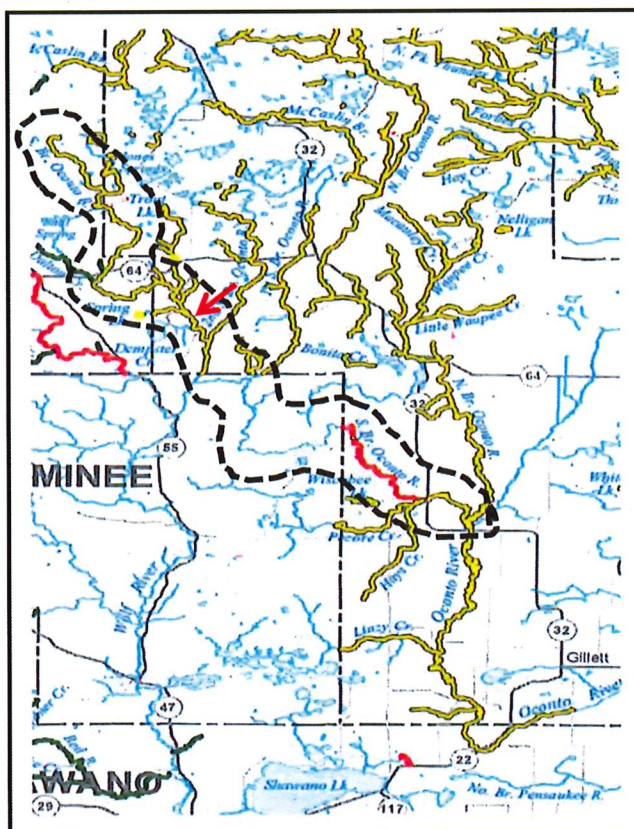


Figure 3. South Branch Oconto River (highlighted with dashed lines) trout regulations. Sampling location shown by arrow.

Yellow – All trout species 8 inches minimum length. Daily bag limit 3.

Red – Special Regulation – Artificial lures, all trout species 12 inch minimum length. Daily bag limit 2 (in total).

Menominee Reservation waters – Tribal policies apply.